

Attention span in simultaneous interpreting

Konina A. A., Alexeeva S. V., Chernigovskaya T. V.

Laboratory for Cognitive Sciences, Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russia

a.konina@spbu.ru

Simultaneous interpreting was more than once labeled as one of the most requiring jobs there is. In our study we hypothesize that simultaneous interpreters would have a larger attention span than a control group performing a similar demanding task. Simultaneous interpreters (N=7) and the control group (N=17) were instructed to shadow the speaker in a video sequence where he was giving a speech surrounded by 20 different objects, to press a button when looking into the camera and to press another button when the speaker pronounced proper names creating a situation of significant cognitive load similar to one experienced by simultaneous interpreters. Both groups were later presented with a recall test (20 target stimuli, 40 distractors) and comprehension questions. We did not find any difference in recall test performance between the groups (U Mann-Whitney, $p=0,13$), but interestingly interpreters were worse at identifying distractors than the control group (mixed-effects linear model, $p=0,042$) and better at identifying target stimuli ($p=0,054$, Task type X Picture type interaction, $p=0.03$). Moreover, both groups were making more mistakes in target stimuli identification compared to distractors ($p<0.001$). The results could be an indication that interpreter perception filters are tilted towards accumulating more incoming information than those of a person without simultaneous interpreting training.

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